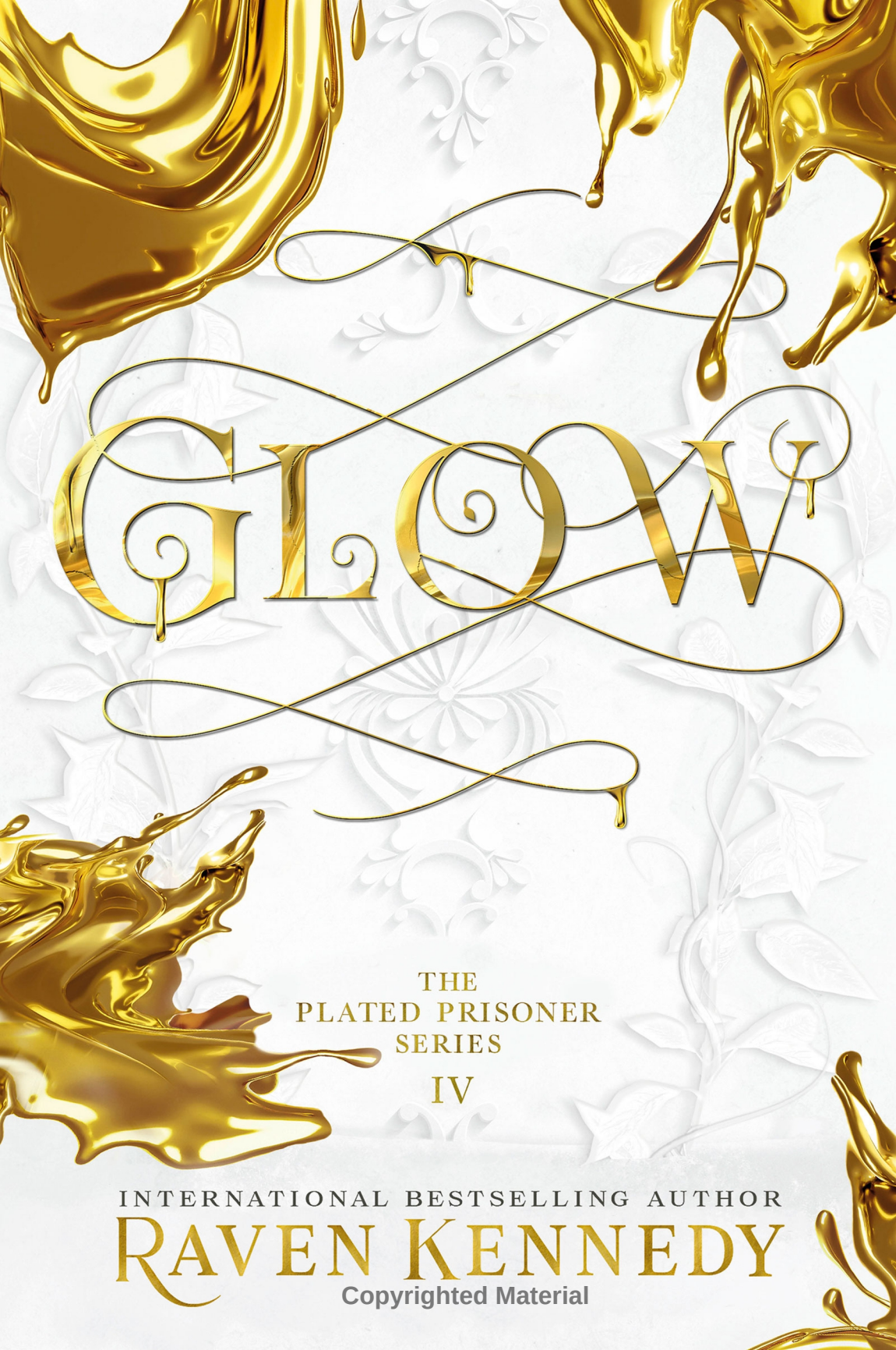


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Please Note: This book contains explicit content and dark elements that may be triggering to some. It includes explicit romance, mature language, violence, death, physical and emotional abuse, past trauma, and the process of recovering from emotional and physical manipulation. It is not intended for anyone under 18 years of age. This is book four in a series.

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To those who stand on their own two feet
despite their stumbles.

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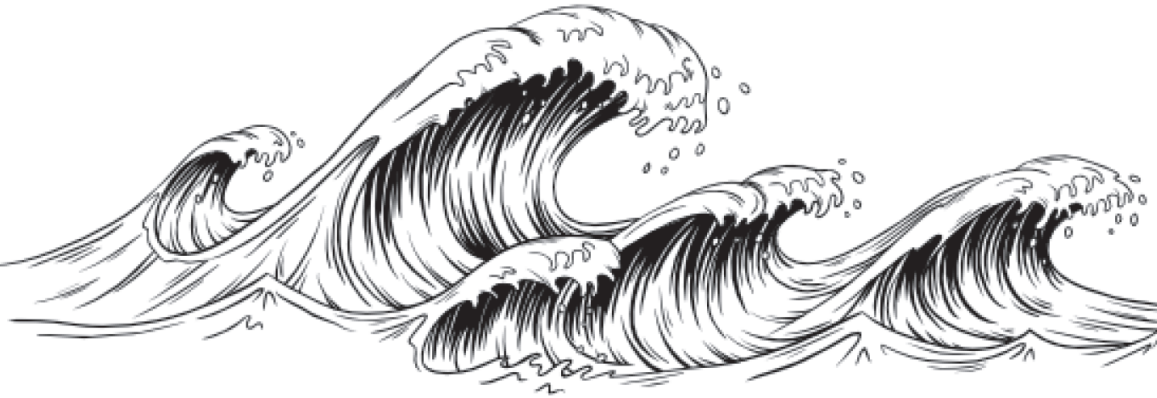


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CHAPTER 1

QUEEN KAILA

The air is full of screams.

The entire front of Ranhold Castle is an ocean shore of people washed up on the courtyard. They ebb and flow, frothy cries making waves as they undulate in a shallow mob.

Behind me, Ranhold guards are trying to push out the subjects through the gate, with frenzied command that barely cuts through the chaos. Half the people are trying to come back in to see what's going on, the other half fleeing for their lives.

Manu and my guards got us outside, but only just. My heartbeat is a hammer, and the breath that I'm sucking in is just as rushed as the adrenaline pumping through my veins. It's the sort of harried vulnerability that makes me feel no better than a cornered animal. One who's frozen in snow, unable to move. And yet, what's really keeping me still are the sounds coming from the castle. Sloshing. Dripping. Clanging.

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Smashing. *More screaming*.

Another sharp slap of shrieks erupts when liquid gold suddenly bursts through the front doors. Everyone flinches back, gasping bodies caught in the swell of panic, shoving into the mass behind them as they try to get further away.

Manu and Keon stand in front of me, facing Ranhold Castle, and they both push me back protectively while our guards surround us. Not all of my guards made it out, yet I haven't wanted to look around to see just how many I lost.

The gold spews from the doorway and curls around the castle walls, gushing down the front steps. Like outstretched hands, it nearly grabs hold of a man, but he gets yanked out of the way by some guards at the very last second.

The liquid metal slams down from its unsuccessful reach like a petulant child smashing fists in a fit against the ground and sending splatters flying. Mottled gashes of gold streak across the snow-covered steps, marring the stone. More of it drips like blood from the window sills, staining the glass and peeking past the frames.

We're surrounded by the castle's lantern-lit outer walls, and even though it's supposed to make us feel protected, it's only keeping everyone trapped out here together. I'm about to suggest to my brother that we get away in case the gold keeps pouring out and we become trapped with the crowd, but another loud crash happens somewhere inside, cutting me off.

My eyes wildly veer between my brother's and Keon's forms, wondering what else inside has been destroyed, who else has been killed. But then, as if that last noise was a signal for the end, the gold that's gripping the front walls suddenly stops glinting, stops rippling.

It hardens in place as the castle goes suddenly quiet.

The screaming of the crowd cuts off too, everyone waiting with bated breath to see if it's actually over. I'm not sure how long we all stand there, watching and listening, but

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the splotches of gold along the grayed, frozen stone are no longer moving, and despite the torches casting off firelight, everything seems darker. Colder.

The movement and sounds may have ceased, yet those things instead spring to life inside of me. My body begins to tremble, my mind a funnel of noisy thoughts swirling around.

What in the Divine just happened?

My shoes are soaked through as I stand here in the snow, my skin pebbled from the awful frigid night air. I wasn't meant to be outside in this dress. I should be in the ballroom right now. I should be celebrating my engagement announcement and making plans for my control to now spread to Sixth Kingdom.

At the very least, I should be warmer.

When I look down, I see blotches of gold splashed onto my deep blue dress in a motley of gleaming spots. I don't dare run my finger over it. Not after what I saw in that ballroom.

"Has it stopped?" I ask.

The question is overly simplified for what just happened in there. Has it stopped—*it*. The berserk gold that just rose up with furious motive. I already know my mind is going to be stuck with the memory of tonight for a long time, that I'm going to replay it over and over again.

I won't be able to erase the way the gold moved with violent precision. How it dripped down the walls. How it pooled on the ground. How it splashed, and stabbed, and *consumed*.

"Has it stopped?" I ask again, my voice shriller than I've ever heard it.

I've never been so close to mortal danger before, and my body knows it. Which is why my pulse is still racing, why the tempo of it is pounding in my ears.

Why I can't stop shaking.

"I think so," Manu finally answers as he turns around.

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His husband still watches the castle, as if he doesn't trust taking his eyes off it. As if he expects the violence of the liquid metal to lash back to life.

"Damned Divine," I hear him say beneath his breath.

Perhaps his murmured curse has pulled the stopper from the bottled-up crowd, because a flurry of voices starts to pour through the courtyard. Automatically, my power sweeps out, pulling their words to me. My magic sweeps down, catching what they're saying and stringing them up in my mind.

"*What's happened?"*

"*This is King Midas's gold-touch."*

"Where's King Midas? Where's King Rot?"

"Our prince is dead."

"Did Midas do this on purpose?"

"But what happened*?"*

The words flow from their mouths to my ears, where they gather like threads in a web for me to spin. Yet soon, I don't even need my power to hear them, because the crowd begins to shout, demanding answers in frenzied cries loud enough for all.

"Shit," Manu hisses, turning toward me. "Maybe you should—"

Someone suddenly shouts, "I know what happened!"

All eyes slam onto the woman, who staggers to the front. She points a shaky finger toward the doors, gold bleeding from their depths like a gaping wound.

"This wasn't King Midas's doing!" she spits out, a long curtain of black hair hanging down her back, her dress looking like part of it melted off. "It was his gold-touched pet! She stole his magic!"

I rear back in surprise, her words tangling up in my head.

"Who is that?" Manu murmurs.

A man from the crowd shoves forward. "What are you talking about, woman?"

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She straightens up, sweeping a proud look over the crowd. “I am one of King Midas’s royal saddles, and I can tell you all right now that this was all because of Auren. She did this! The gilded whore stole his magic when he gold-touched her, and she figured out she could use it for herself. She lied to him, and now she’s attacked him. I saw it with my own eyes when I was running out!”

Shock cuts like an oar through a surf.

“What the fuck?” Manu hisses beneath his breath as he turns to me.

When the woman places a hand on her stomach, it occurs to me who exactly this is.

Mist. The saddle Midas impregnated.

As her words sink in, I start to shake my head in denial at first, and yet, it *must* be true, because what I saw in that room… It was like the gold wasn’t in Midas’s control at all, like someone else was doing it…

How did I not discover this secret sooner?

“Look!” someone shouts. “Timberwings! Someone’s fleeing on timberwings!”

“It’s her! The gilded murderer!”

My head angles in the direction of the man who spoke, my gaze following where he’s pointing. I only get a split second before the view is swallowed by the darkness of night, a flash of feathers and talons disappearing into the clouds.

Was that King Rot with Lady Auren?

“I told you!” Mist cries out. “She’s a deceiver. A cheat. She seduced Midas and took his power, and now she’s going to do the same to King Rot!”

A crescendo of voices surges, and within moments, the rumor is caught up in a current too forceful to stop.

How in the Divine-damned could I have missed something like this? How could I not have known?

“You’re trembling,” my brother says, yanking me out of

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my flooding thoughts. His gaze casts over my shoulder. "Your queen is cold. Find something for her."

There's shuffling behind me and then the weight of a cloak being draped over my shoulders. "Here you are, Queen Kaila."

My fingers grip the front of the cloak, pulling it tight around my chest, though it does nothing to ward off the chill, because it's seeped all the way through to my bones. I need to be back in Third, walking along the beach at the height of day in order to feel any sort of warmth again after being stuck here for so long.

However, I can't go home yet. Not when everything I've worked so hard for is falling through my fingers. I can feel the eyes of the crowd glancing at me, waiting to see what I'll do.

"Manu, have someone confirm that Ravinger just fled with Lady Auren."

My brother nods at my command before moving out of my line of sight, where I hear him issuing orders to someone. I glance around the courtyard, noting that only Ranhold's guards are gathered outside. Not a single guard of Midas's. Not a bit of gold-plated armor in sight.

"Keon," I call, and he immediately turns to me. "Have some of Ranhold's guards go inside and confirm that the danger has passed. See if they can find Midas and if he needs help."

He moves away with a nod, pointing at a couple of Fifth's guards standing around a splatter of gold on the snow, kicking at the solidifying puddle warily.

As I continue to stare at the castle, the wind picks up, glazed slush starting to spit from the sky, as if it wasn't miserable enough out here already.

Three of the Ranhold soldiers break away, walking forward with grim faces as they head for the broken doorway. The first one holds out his hands to the others, then kneels at the

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first splash of the spilled gold that lies motionless on the steps.

He presses his finger against it, and when it does nothing, he stands again, nodding to the others. Together, they walk up to the doorway, boots clicking over the solidified gold before they disappear inside.

We wait.

The crowd still gathered in the courtyard has grown quiet again, the anxiousness of the wait seeming to clog up their throats.

Despite my own warring thoughts, I walk to the front of the castle, stopping to face everyone as I put on a calm yet strong demeanor. Their prince is dead, Rot has fled, and Midas isn't here, so I'm the one they need to look to, and it's important that I cultivate that. Right now, I need to be seen.

"Do not fear," I announce. "The danger is over, and I will find out if what has been claimed is true."

The people murmur, my powers gathering the whispered relief, the admiration, the respect they have for me.

"Well done, sister," Manu says beneath his breath.

When one of the guards reappears, I nod to Keon to go collect his report. My brother-in-law steps over, expression stoic before dismissing the man, but my eyes scan the crowd, magic picking up their mumblings.

I break off my magic when Keon comes over.

"Well?" Manu asks nervously.

"All the gold seems to have stopped its movement and is solidified," he says quietly, keeping his voice down.

"And Midas?" I press.

His brown eyes center on me. "They believe he's dead."

I suck in a shocked breath. It stays stuck to my throat, just as the words themselves weave in my head, wrapping around my skull in trapping strands.

Dead.

My lips press together, and I feel my eyes chiseling into

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the face of the castle. All my hard work...all this time I've spent on my machinations, and now this.

King Midas does *nothing* for me if he's dead.

I came here to negotiate deals, to exert my own wants through an impressionable prince and a rich king. Things changed, but they were for the better. I had a *plan*. I was going to be the first monarch in history to join two kingdoms together through marriage, while having a hand in a third.

Because power is everything, and though I may not have a physical magic like gold-touch or rot, I have words, and a queen can do a lot with a web full of people's secrets.

I have been working endlessly since I took my throne to ensure that my people see me as just as much of a power threat as any other monarch. That would've been solidified even further with these alliances. Now, all of that is crumbling.

All because of Lady Auren. *Lady*. As if a saddle pet warrants the term.

Anger and fear clash inside my head, though I don't let it show. Not when so many people are watching. As a woman in power, you can never let people see your true emotional reactions because they would only use them against you.

"I want to see."

Before either of them can stop me, I stride toward the castle, toes frozen as more snow saturates my silk slippers.

"Sister," Manu calls, but I don't stop. I hear rushing footsteps as he and Keon catch up with me just before I make it to the steps.

"At least let me go first," Keon says as he abruptly cuts in front so he can walk up before me.

"Be careful," Manu cautions.

With a brisk nod, Keon heads up the steps, and as soon as he does, I follow behind him. "Kaila," Manu hisses beside me. "Just because it's stable right now doesn't mean it's going to stay like that. We don't know how volatile it is."

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"It's solidified," I say, shoes rasping against the slick gold just before we make it to the top step. The doors are hanging from their hinges like teeth knocked loose and crooked.

"It was solidified *before*, *too*," he retorts. "And look what happened with that."

"Looking to see what happened is exactly my intention."

I hear him sigh as I walk through the doorway, but my footsteps slow as soon as I'm inside. The flames from the wall sconces are flickering erratically, as if they too are jumpy, still recovering from the assault.

The entry hall echoes with our footsteps as Manu and I follow a few paces behind Keon until we reach the ballroom. All three of us stop in our tracks when we make it through the doorway.

I blink at the darkness that's settled over the room. At the darkness and at the gold inside that glints in shadowed warning. Before, flames from the chandeliers and sconces lit up the entire space, making it rival the daylight. But now, everything's been cast in shadow. The only light comes from the iron furnaces still burning in the corners, their presence only now visible because the ballroom is empty. This room doesn't even look remotely the same. It's as if the entire space was made with wax, and someone held a burning candle to it.

The walls look half melted off, gold frozen in its drip. The ceiling, too, has strings of it cast down like icicles, ends pointed down at us with sharp purpose. The plated pillars are bare of their gilt, every bit of golden adornment melted away.

The floor is a rippled mess, clumpy in some areas, raised with motionless shapes that make me cringe. A visible hand reaching up, frozen in place. A gilt lump of a body curled beside the raised platform. A frozen wave caught below the mezzanine, as if the balcony melted clear off and splashed to the floor below where I can see someone's leg sticking out.

"Gods..."

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Manu's whispered declaration spurs me back into motion. My footsteps take me across the ballroom, gaze cautious, skipping from one spot of gold to the next. Yet as I get further in, a horrible groan comes from the walls. The floor. The ceiling. Like an old home settling with cracks and creaks, only this is far worse. It's eerie. Like the gold is a ghost, bemoaning our presence, threatening to haunt.

I go still, pulse spiking even more than before. Beside me, Manu grips my arm. "Kaila, we should get out of here."

The groan tapers off like a sigh, the room falling silent and still once more.

Shrugging off my brother's touch, I continue in my search. "I want to see."

Keon points forward and says, "There."

As soon as I lay eyes on what he's pointed out, my feet take me forward, all the way to the far end. To the bulbous spot now marring the space of the wall.

"Great Divine..."

It's him.

His crown is missing from his head. Perhaps melted into the gold that now encases him. He looks like he's being melted into the wall itself, like it was trying to suck him into its depths and swallow him whole. His agonized face is on display. Wide eyes held with shock and fear.

King Midas is now nothing but a corpse encased in a gold tomb.

The gold groans again, as if staking its claim.

"No…"

We whirl around at the woman's voice to find Mist stumbling forward, looking at Midas with horror. "My King…" She falls to her knees, clutching her belly, the tinged, demolished room carrying the echo of her cries. "She did this. She did this to him."

"But *how*?" Keon murmurs as we watch her sob. "How

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is that possible?"

I think back to each interaction, to everything I've been told. I stare at Midas's face as I think. As I hear. Flicking past strands of old webs that I've collected, words swaying back and forth in my mind.

Monarchs are secretive about their magic. It's strategic. Knowing when to show your hand and knowing when to conceal it. In some cases, it's best to make people underestimate you. In others, monarchs are known to show enough power to make everyone either revere you or fear you. Sometimes both.

Midas gilded the dining table—it was the first time I saw it with my own eyes. He also gold-touched this entire ballroom for tonight's celebration. Two perfect spectacles.

Yet, tonight, his gold behaved as if he wasn't in control of it at all. Because he wasn't.

The gold-touch power was real, there's no doubt about that. And he's never gold-touched another living person, other than Auren.

This must be why.

I thought her greatest secret was that she was sleeping with an enemy army commander. I thought the gold-touched favored was just that—a favorite royal saddle for him to ride.

I was wrong on both counts.

I *detest* being wrong.

Midas made her into something ostentatious, a gaudy prize to flaunt. Men always have their fixations, especially when it comes to women. Their enthusiasm for their obsessions always straddles the line between infatuation and hate. One simple move, and the master will turn on their pretty pet.

But perhaps in this case...the pet was the one to turn on her master.

The fear in my mind digs down into my belly. If she can

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truly thieve powers, then what if she tried to steal mine? What if she *succeeded*?

My teeth click and grind. Instead of falling into panic, I need to figure out how I can weave things to my own advantage. Because if Lady Auren tried to steal what is mine, I will *ruin* her.

Seeing the hardened metal is what solidifies my own spinning thoughts. Midas is encased in gold like he's been cast in a mold, ready to be plucked out and sharpened by a blacksmith.

I thought he was useless to me dead, but perhaps not. Perhaps all I have to do is use what he's been forged into.

A weapon.

"When he gold-touched her, some of his power must've transferred to her," I say quietly. "He wouldn't have wanted anyone to ever know that."

Midas was secretive about *everything*, but this? This is an entirely different layer of dangerous secrets. Is that why he kept her around? Because he trained her to take on the powers of others to use to his advantage?

"This isn't good," Keon says.

"Kaila," my brother begins. "What if it wasn't a fluke? What if that's *her* magic? Being able to take on the magic of others if they use it on her? Did you…?"

"I did," I say with a sharp nod, fresh anger budding through me.

"What if she steals *your* power?"

I don't like hearing my own worry spoken aloud. My knees lock together, tongue pressing against clenched teeth. My gaze on Midas shifts to my blotted reflection shining from his gilded chest.

This wasn't how tonight was supposed to go. I wasn't supposed to be in danger of someone taking my power and using it against me.

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"How are we going to use this?" Manu says, because like me, he's grown up learning how to always spin every instance to our own political advantage. Tonight is no different.

I glance around the ballroom, but we're still alone other than a blubbering Mist, who's sobbing into her hands. "We tell people the truth," I say. "That Midas's favored turned on him. That she had an affair with King Rot to make him jealous. That she was jealous of my engagement with Midas."

"Make sure everyone knows she's the villain."

I nod. "All of Orea will hate her."

"But what about Sixth Kingdom?" Manu asks. "Now, there obviously won't be a marriage."

"But we publicly announced our engagement," I reply. "It will be difficult, but if I play it right, I can still push for control."

"The people there are still rioting," Keon says. "Plus, they *murdered* their old queen. What makes you think they'll accept you with Midas dead and no marriage ceremony?"

I shoot him a smile. "Because I'm not the Cold Queen. I'm the warm, charismatic, beautiful Kaila Ioana. I'll make them love me as my own people in Third love me."

"We know how beloved Kaila is to our people. She can sell it," my brother says with a definitive nod.

"We will have to move fast," Keon says. "As soon as we can, we will need to visit Sixth, do some sort of ceremony to honor Midas's life, make you the grieving betrothed for them to sympathize over."

If there's one thing I know how to do, it's to make a kingdom love me.

"I can do that."

More sharp, gasping wails behind us make me want to grit my teeth, and I spare Mist another look.

She will still have to be dealt with.

If I'm going to try and take Sixth, I certainly cannot have

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her bastard heir being born from her womb. But that will be a problem for another day.

"There will be a lot happening now," I go on quietly. "Once the other monarchs find out about Lady Auren's ability to steal power, they'll want to get involved. Plus, there's the issue of Fifth."

"I actually have an idea about that," Manu says, and my attention immediately sharpens.

My brother isn't my advisor for nothing. He has a brilliant mind, knows how to play a room, knows how to read people, and above all, he will always be loyal to me.

"Since our focus now needs to be on how to secure Sixth, as well as how to take care of Lady Auren, the last thing we want is to lose all the work we've done to create a foothold here in Fifth. So, I propose that we immediately put in the search for the closest kin of Fulke, because now that the prince is dead, Ranhold needs an heir. We will track down whichever ones have power, and sift through the best candidates. Then *we* will choose which heir gets the throne. *We* will determine who takes power. And in exchange for our support...they will support us, and us alone."

I smile. "You are perfect, brother."

He gives me a matching grin.

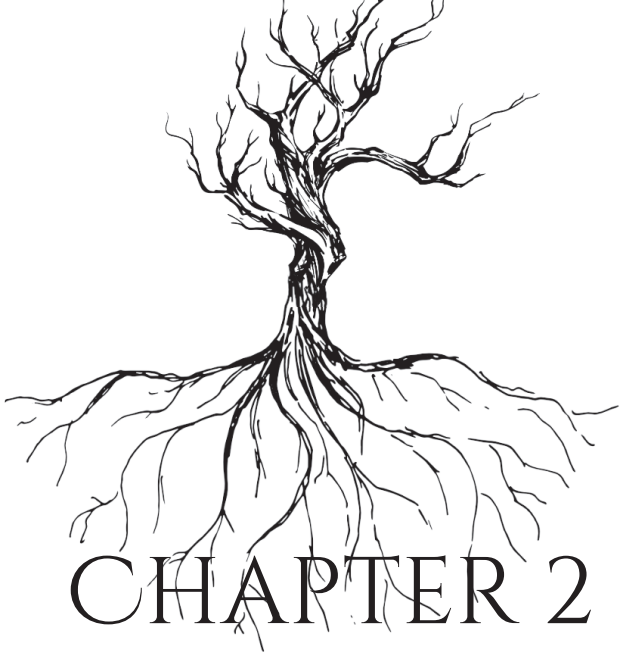
"And if anyone tries to oppose us in claiming Sixth or with having our hand in naming a Fifth heir?" Keon questions worriedly.

My smile grows sharp, twisted with ruthlessness. "Any voice that speaks up against me, won't have a voice to use after that."

And if Lady Auren thinks she can take what I've worked for, she's going to realize soon that she's not the only one who knows how to steal what she wants.

I may not have gold-touch, and I may not have rot, but words are the most powerful weapon of all, and I will wield them.

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CHAPTER 2

SLADE

There's a tempest dredging the sky, while I hold a lifeless body in my arms.

The impending storm is coming in with bared, frozen teeth to scrape the air with malice, its sharp frigidity beating at my face as it roars.

In my head, I'm counting the seconds. It took sixty for my timberwing to get to me, called from the whistle bursting between clenched teeth. Another forty to get on Argo's back, for Lu to strap me in as I held Auren in my arms.

Another sixty seconds has taken us here, into the clutches of the clouds that are closing in. The night's weather has decided to turn on me, the signs of an impending storm clogging the horizon like tufts of cotton in a drain.

Ice scrapes against my cheeks like jagged fingernails as my timberwing rushes on. I hold Auren closer, keeping my cloak over her, angling her face against my chest as my arms tuck her tightly to my body.

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She's too cold, too exposed, too *still*.

Her heart doesn't beat, her chest doesn't rise, her skin has gone sallow. All because of me. Because of what I did.

With a quick glance over my shoulder, I see Ranhold Castle below, lit up with torches. The face of it has now been marred with a splash of angry, solidified gold, erupting through the mouth of the doors and staining the gray stonework like insipid gilt magma that went inert before it could do any further damage.

It looks like the gold was trying to eat its way through the whole damn castle. To inhale it from an unforgiving mouth and devour it with wrath. Like a dam giving way, this is what happens when power is suppressed for too long, left to collect, to rise, to beat against its containment until the cracks form and it can finally *break free*.

I turn back around and hold Auren a little bit tighter.

I've got to get away from the castle—from the gold—but *how much further* is the question. Because every second I wait puts her in even more danger.

There's a double-edged sword, and Auren's life is balancing at the tip of it.

I have to get her as far away as I can, but I can't risk leaving her in this rotted stasis for too long. Without knowing how far her power can reach, it's a guessing game as to how far we need to go.

All I want to do is get the rot out of her. Her body can't take more depletion. I need to have her on land too, settled and secure, because when I remove my power, there's a chance she can still call on hers, and I can't have that happen in the air.

Her aura is nothing but a pale wisp, like dying mist in the light. If I wait too long, my power that's infested her will do more damage than I can reverse, and I can't let that happen either. I can't let *either* of those things happen. So this will be

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down to the very last second.

Time and distance are my enemy *and* my ally.

With anxious worry, my heels come up to nudge my timberwing. He lets out a call, either to show his displeasure or to signal to the rest of the flock. I know the others are following.

"Faster, Argo," I urge the feathered beast, though my voice gets ripped away like hands snatching stolen trinkets.

Although the wind beats at us, Argo pushes on in a burst of speed, and I keep the reins loose to give him his head as his giant wings stretch out and cut through the night sky, lit up only by a veiled moon. I get jerked back, and if it weren't for the leather strap from the saddle hooked to the buckled belt around my waist, there's a good chance I would've fallen right off.

Wouldn't be the first time.

Yet right now, I'm not riding for sport or for scouting. This is life and death.

Her life.

We fly as fast as possible away from Ranhold, and Fifth Kingdom's skies seem to punish us for it. Perhaps the deceased King Fulke and Prince Niven want someone to blame for their demise.

Some of Auren's hair slips out from beneath the hood of my cloak, its golden strands whipping around in the wind. With one hand, I pull the cloak tighter around her ear, trying to keep the cold from touching her even though I know she can't feel it.

Thirty more seconds have passed.

Dread is stacking up in my gut like the heavy bricks of an insurmountable wall. It feels as if I'm counting the increments of Auren's soul slipping away bit by bit.

I've seen what happens when I wait too long to reverse the rot, and I know just how damaging it is. I know how much

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danger I put her in.

Guilt ravages me for what I've done, for the magic holding her hostage, but my resolve to keep her safe hardens. I spare another glance behind me, but Ranhold is now out of view, the clouds blocking the kingdom completely.

From the corner of my eye, I see a dark shadow cut through the clouds, and I'm not at all surprised at the timberwing and rider that swoops in. The beast's size somehow makes even Osrik look small in comparison. He watches me wordlessly, hands tight on the reins, and I give a nod.

I hope I've gone far enough, because I don't dare wait a second longer. With a tug on the reins, I make Argo dive. My timberwing lets out a call, and I curl over Auren, bracing for our descent.

When Osrik sees I'm making to land, he lets out a sharp whistle and follows suit. In the distance, I can hear the call of more timberwings answering back.

Where I go, my Wrath follows.

My eyes burn with the force of the wind that rushes up at me as we continue to drop, cutting through heavy clouds saturated with the impending storm.

The lines of power along my jaw writhe and snap as I monitor the link of my magic now swirling inside of Auren. Rot. Corrosion. *Death*. It doesn't belong anywhere near her, and yet, *I* put it there.

I fucking hate it.

My knees lock in as I lean forward and grip the hold of my timberwing's strap. "Come on..." I murmur.

Maybe Argo can feel my rushing panic, because he somehow manages to dive even faster. Water freezes at the corners of my squinting eyes, and my heart pounds against my chest loud enough to compete with the rushing wind.

"Almost," I say against her hair. "Just hold on a few

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seconds more."

Finally, we cut through the last of the mist and clouds, only to be greeted by the frozen ground below, brandishing the world like a sheet of gray. When it looks like we're going to crash right into it, Argo lifts up at the last moment and swoops in a circle right alongside Osrik's timberwing before both land on their taloned feet, kicking up a spray of snow like the sea crashing into the hull of a ship.

My frozen fingers are already unhooking the buckle holding me in place. I slip down, taking the impact of the jump with my knees so as not to jar Auren too much. Before I can take a single step forward, Os is there, ripping off his cloak and laying it on the ground just as I see more timberwings landing like shadowed spectators.

"Stay back," I call over my shoulder.

I lay Auren down on the cloak, the faintest traces of rotten lines stretching up the veins in her neck. Her hair is spilled in a halo around her, somehow gleaming even in the darkness. She looks so small with my cloak tucked around her, so lifeless.

I kneel over her, immediately focusing as I snap my eyes closed. My magic is there, clinging to her prone form like a poison. Unnatural decay is slogging through her veins and withering the heart in her chest. It's slinking up her deteriorating throat, barred by her unmoving lips.

Tension rolls through me. Instinctually, I want to yank the magic out of her as quickly as possible, but I've found pulling it out too fast is like ripping a blade from a wound. I don't want to do any more damage than I've already done.

Carefully, I call the power back inch by inch so as not to shock her system. Behind me, I can hear the murmured words of the rest of my Wrath, uncertain footsteps shifting in the snow, timberwings chuffing at one another, and thunder from the clouds we just departed signaling a cold front blowing in.

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I shove all of that away and keep my awareness on the magic coursing through her. Like the roots of a weed, I drag it out as gently as I can manage. Fingers dig through soil, removing the rotten stasis I buried her in, letting her body reacclimate. I'm meticulous, lifting each bit of corrupted patches like drying clay, ridding it piece by cracked piece.

Despite the biting air, sweat beads at my temples. My teeth clench as I pull the power back to me, back to the recesses carved from my veins to simmer in my own spoils. I get it all out of her, until there's just one single fragment left. One seed left buried in the center of her chest.

Yet when I call to it, try to unearth it from her depths, I find resistance. Instead of withdrawing like the rest, this piece sinks in its thorns as if it's trying to stay.

As if it's trying to *keep* her in its clutches.

My brow furrows and my hands shake, while the rotted roots on my skin stretch down the length of my arms. It slinks past my palms and cloys beneath my fingertips, the dark lines rubbing me raw from the inside out, threatening to pierce through my very skin.

A war of confusion and fear jumps in my jaw.

Never has my rot been so reluctant. Never has it been so persistent in *staying.* I haven't struggled with controlling it like this for years, not since I was a boy. I had to learn very early on how to handle the malodorous magic before it destroyed everything, including myself.

So what the fuck is happening?

Frantically, I check over the rest of her, but there's no other blight in her, not a single other part besmirched. The rest of the rot is gone, leaving her as she was before, so why won't this last piece leave?

"Let go." My tongue is heavy with the taste of unrelenting toxins. "Let go of her."

It writhes in reply, like brambles twisting around her

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chest, like it wants to root inside of her. Panic slices through me like the sharpest blade.

"*Get the fuck out of her!*"

Magic and might unleash from me, stronger than the torrent of the storm trying to rend from the sky. With a crack that splits the air and clangs my teeth, I give one massive *tug*.

The force of my violent pull sends me flying back, while Auren's entire spine bows up from the ground like an arcing wave.

"Rip!"

I lie stunned and out of breath, eyes locked on the shadowed outline of clouds covering the night sky above me. Snow flies up from the impact of Lu's knees as she hits the ground next to me, eyes wide with worry. "Are you okay?"

"What the fuck just happened?" Osrik demands.

I hear Judd let out a whistle... "Your roots..."

My eyes drop, gaze falling to where the veins in my hands are writhing and snapping angrily. I can feel everyone's gaze lift to my neck and face, but I don't need them to say anything, because I can *feel* the lined roots beneath my skin. Fucking everywhere. As if I haven't used my power in months, as if it's pent up inside of me to an unstable magnitude.

But it doesn't matter, because I just ripped that last bit of rot out of her, so everything will be okay.

Lu tries to help me sit up, but I push her fretting hands away, a pained groan escaping me. I quickly lean over Auren again, but the moment I see her face, I realize that she's still not awake.

She's still not moving.

My panic stems and swells.

Rot bleeds into the ground, shooting into the depths of the earth just as thoroughly and as violently as my stomach falls straight through into my feet.

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What did I do?

Fingers dig into the snow, rotted mulch spreading from my touch, corrupting the ground with putrid lines. I don't just feel it spreading into the snow—I feel it wrapping around my heart, squeezing, crumbling, making it wither right here in my chest.

My eyes slam shut, and my roots stab up against the skin of my neck. They wrap around my veins like furious snakes, constricting and biting, making me hurt all over, but it doesn't matter.

Because I killed her. I fucking *killed* her—

Her lips suddenly part. The movement makes my eyes snap open just as a shuddering breath lurches out of her. Wisps of black expel from her mouth, the poisoned air evaporating between us.

Relief pounds through my temples. "Auren?"

But her eyes don't open, and dread pulls at my chest.

I close my eyes to focus on the inside of her again, and immediately, the blood drains from my face. Because that piece—that single scrap of rot that I should've just ripped out of her when I got knocked on my ass—is still there.

It's still. Fucking. There.

Stunned, I mentally try to grip around it again and yank, again and again, but it won't budge. It won't leave.

She breathes, another exhale of murky black misting past her lips.

My heart pounds like fists against my ribs, ready to punch through and fight. And still, no matter how much I call to my power, that piece in her chest won't come out. It's sunken in, like a stain of ink in gold fabric that I can't get out.

Yet her chest is rising and falling. Her heart has begun to beat. She's *alive*.

I can't get that fucking last drop of rot out of her, but she's alive, and that's what matters.

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"Wake up, Auren."

Seconds go by. Five, ten, twenty. I count them all.

"Is she okay?"

My back tenses at the rough question spoken from Digby, his voice hostage to both injury and disuse. I don't answer him, and I don't know if anyone else attempts to. I keep watching her. Willing her to open her eyes.

"Come on, Goldfinch…" I murmur, urgency notched around my neck like a noose.

There's the sound of shuffling footsteps, then Digby is pushing his way forward to kneel next to me. "Is she okay?" he demands again.

When I still don't answer, his hand grabs the front of my shirt, and he tugs me to face him with surprising strength, considering the bruised state of him. "What did you do?" he snarls through swollen lips split with blood and frost.

Osrik is there in an instant, lifting Digby and pulling him away. "*What did you do?*" Digby's shout is mangled, hoarse with accusation, but it melds with the voice of my own inner terror. The two of them exchange some heated words, but fear is too busy slamming in my ears for me to hear what they say.

What did I do?

The panic and fear that's been latched to me since the moment I used my power on her comes flaring up in the form of a tremor through my hands.

"Why isn't she waking up?" Lu asks beside me, but I don't know. I don't fucking *know*, so I can't say a damn thing.

I clasp her cold cheeks in my hands, hissing at the pain throbbing in my fingers. Even now, it's as if my power wants to split from my skin and go back to her.

Her aura is dull. Just wisps of dreary gold barely skimming against her silhouette. It should be gleaming brightly despite the night, yet it's nothing like the flare of potent power and life that usually shines from her.

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I waited too long.

I should've rotted her sooner, before she'd nearly drained herself. I should've landed faster, ripped my magic out of her earlier.

"Don't do this," I grit out. To her, to the gods.

Not now.

Not after everything. Not when I just fucking got her.

"I need you to wake up," I order, but really, it's a plea pulled from the pit of my soul. What if she *never* wakes up? What if that clinging seed of rot has taken root inside of her and won't let her go?

The whole reason I used my magic on her was to stop her from draining herself to death. But I made it fucking worse. I made it worse, and now my own power is lashing out against me like a thousand serpents ready to bite, while she's been tainted with my magic.

My head drops, forehead pressing against hers, my hands still on her cold cheeks. "Don't do this," I plead, eyes shut tight. "You're stronger than this, Goldfinch. You are. So. Wake. *Up*."

She doesn't.

"Fuck!" Jerking upright, my fist pummels the snow beside me, the meat of my hand splitting open from the sharp ice packed into the ground. "*Fuck, fuck, fuck!*"

I can hear Digby fighting like hell against the others, cursing me, threats and profanity slung against my back like a whip. Beating me with the realization—

"I did this." Three words cut from the keenest guilt.

Lu's lips press together at my declaration. "So *undo* it."

"I fucking tried!" I snap, frustration bringing my hand up to drive through my hair. "I *am* trying."

I can't think straight. My pulse is pounding at my temples, the ground is shaking beneath my feet, something is roaring in my ears. My magic wails inside of me, bleeding

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into my irises, making me see lines that are not there. I'm pouring rot out now, too much, too fast, making it melt down into the ground, weakening the earth, spoiling its surface.

I hear shouts, or maybe that's the wind or the power bucking in my bones.

"Rip, your power..."

My entire body is shaking, every inch of my skin being prodded and stretched, wanting to lash out, and my rot starts to flood the ground, reaching, hissing, wanting to spread and *explode*…

BAM!

I go flying back at the force of a fist to my face, falling back into the snow for the second time in the course of a minute, once again stunned.

"Get your shit together," my brother fumes over me, kneeling even as he lifts me back up from where he sucker punched me. My furious eyes latch onto his face. "You're leaking rot all over the Divine-damned place. Suck it up *right now*. You don't have the luxury of losing control."

I blink, Ryatt's snapped words somehow grounding me to the present. A glance down shows that the snow at our feet is browned and sickly, veins like poisonous threads come to spread their toxins. It stretches out in a perfect circle, spoiling the ground and sucking up the moisture from the snow, collapsing it in rubbled ruin.

I take a breath and fist my hands, managing to pull it back before my power can spread any further, managing to pull it back in and in and *in*...

"You got it?" Ryatt demands.

"I got it," I snarl at him.

"Good." He lets me go, and I equal parts want to slam my own fist into his face and thank him for snapping me out of the power pull.

Turning away, I find all of my Wrath and Digby huddling

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around Auren. Judd casts me a wary look. "She's breathing, that's a good sign," he says, as if that will settle me.

"But she's not waking up."

"Did you get all of it?" Lu asks, hands dancing around Auren's sleeves, not quite touching her, just in case.

"Something is wrong. I couldn't get the last piece out."

Lu's eyes go wide, and I hear someone else suck in a breath.

"Maybe I waited too long."

"What does that mean?" Digby asks.

I shake my head at my own loss.

"Well, we need a plan," Lu says, standing up and dusting herself off before she casts a look at the sky. "This storm is coming, and coming in fast. What do you wanna do?"

Taking a moment, I roll back my shoulders, subduing the tyrannical pull of magic as I flex and clench my fingers, forcing the roots to cease their incessant coiling. As soon as I get a handle on them, I push my way past everyone and then carefully gather Auren into my arms, tucking her against my chest, hating how lifeless she still feels.

I start to walk away, but Digby hobbles in front of me, expression murderous. "I told you *to fix her*."

"She just needs to rest," I reply, but even I can hear the uncertainty in my tone. "I need to get her out of the elements."

Mutinous hate is there on his face, but before he can say anything else, I turn to Osrik. "You all fly back to the army. I want our soldiers moved out of Ranhold tonight. I don't trust Queen Kaila. Get them back to Fourth as quickly as they can march." My mouth sets into a grim line. "We'll need them."

Osrik nods, but Judd asks, "What about you?"

I cast a glower at the sky. "I'm going to fly like hell ahead of this storm and get Auren somewhere safe."

"You can't go alone," Lu argues. "And you can't fly all the way to Fourth with her unconscious. It's too far. What if

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she wakes up and gilds you to death?"

Argo tucks in his bark-colored wings and kneels as I approach him, his talons sunk into the deep snow. "I'm not going to Fourth," I call over my shoulder.

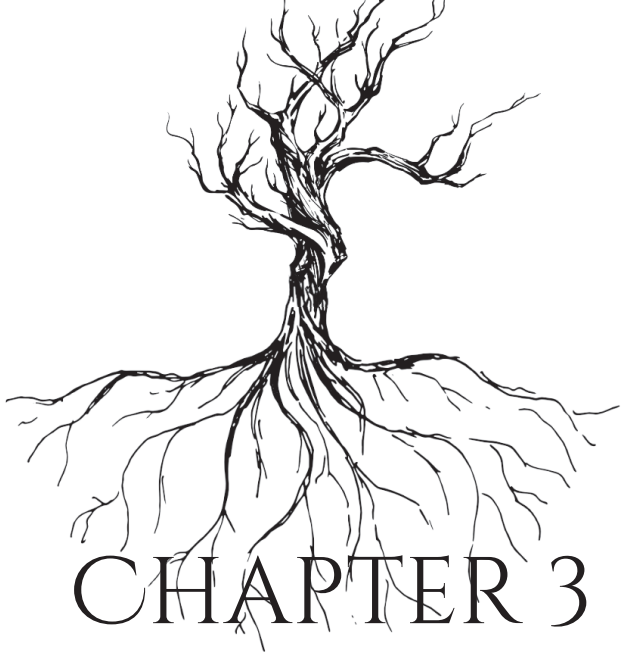
"Where are you taking her, then?" Digby demands.

But it's Ryatt who answers as I grab hold of the saddle strap and hoist myself and Auren onto Argo's back. I lock eyes with my brother's angry gaze just as he answers for me.

"He's taking her to Deadwell."

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CHAPTER 3

SLADE

Age 8

"Slade!"

My shouted name is louder than the birds' song, startling a few into taking flight.

I turn to look at the estate through the branches of the tree, and when I bend one back, one of the buds under my hand puffs out a cloud of blue. Ahead, the black stone building is stained with lines of white from all the times it's rained, the top of it flat except for the square chimneys standing up like stacks of blocks.

My eyes drop down to the sloped grass where she's walking up the hill toward me. I huff out a sigh and let go of the branch, more carefully this time so that I don't get hit in the face with another puff from the tree buds. They smell good at least, but they're awfully messy.

I turn back to the pin bird sitting on my finger. She's just

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a nestling, tufts of down covering her spindly body, but her eyes are open and she coos low in her throat. "It's alright. You'll grow your real feathers soon," I tell her. In a few weeks, she'll have a plume of them at her tail for her to show off, each one as thin as a pin, the ends as sharp as them too. "Then you'll be able to fly off with the rest of them."

My name is shouted again, so I gently place the bird back in its nest before I swing my leg over the branch and start to climb my way down.

When my bare feet land in the grass, I look up at my mother standing over me with her hands on her hips. Her black hair is in a long, loose plait, and she's wearing the same red-colored clothing as me, except she's in a dress. "And what do you think you were doing up in that tree?"

I shrug. "Nothing."

"Mm-hmm," she says as she wipes off some of the blue powder that landed on my shoulder. "I suppose you weren't climbing up there and playing with the birds again."

My face is in a frown when I turn it back up to her. "I wasn't playing. That's baby stuff. I was monitoring."

My mother's lips twitch. "Of course," she says, green eyes flicking down. "And your shoes?"

Another shrug. "It's harder to climb with them. I didn't put them on because I didn't want to fall."

She shakes her head, but all sternness has left her expression as she kneels down in front of me. "Well, I certainly can't have you falling. And how are the birds this morning?"

"They're good," I assure her, feeling excited again now that I can tell she's not angry. "There's a little nestling, but I think its mom left already, so I'm gonna help teach it to fly."

The shape of my mother's green eyes crinkles as she smiles. "If anyone can do it, you can. You've always had a way with them."

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Her hand lifts and she combs her fingers over my hair, but I jerk my head away and press down on it. "I combed it earlier."

She laughs and then fixes my upturned collar. "Come on. It's time to eat."

When she reaches for my hand, I tug it away. "I can't hold hands anymore. I'm eight*," I tell her.*

"Oh, right. Of course," she says, though the side of her mouth has lifted up into a smirk. "I guess I just miss holding my son's hand."

I don't want her to feel bad. It's not that I don't want to hold her hand, it's just little kid stuff. "You could hold Ryatt's," I tell her. "He's only three, so that's alright."

She gently pats my cheek. "That's a very good idea."

Together, we walk away from the copse of trees, passing by the birdbaths and the line of point-shaped shrubs. I look at the estate at the bottom of the slope, but I don't want to go inside. I'd much rather stay out here with the grass and the birds.

There's nothing wrong with the house, really. We've got forty-three rooms, a load of fancy things, and a bunch of servants too. None of the other families in the city have a house as big as ours with as many horses as we do.

But I hate it. I'd rather live in the smaller houses on the city streets. Because then I wouldn't live here. With him.

We're almost to the back door past the gardens when a figure appears in the doorway, and I immediately jerk to a stop, my mother stopping next to me. My father stands there, red shirt buttoned all the way to his neck, not a crease out of place. His bald head cuts into a thick brown beard, and his mouth is already pinched with irritation. It usually is whenever I'm around.

His black eyes skip from her to me, and I stop myself from swallowing. He'd see me do it, and I'm supposed to

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always be something called stoic. I think it means not to feel.

My mother reaches down and takes hold of my hand, and I don't yank away this time. My sweaty palm is held tightly in hers as she takes me the last few steps until we stand in front of him.

"I didn't know you were coming home tonight, Stanton."

"I was able to cut things short with the king," he replies.

His attention drops down to my bare feet, and it makes me want to scrunch up my toes and try to bury them in the grass. My heartbeat turns quick when he gives them a withering look before snapping his eyes back to my mother.

"I see that you've been shirking your motherly duties while I've been away, Elore."

My head instantly drops, eyes finding my dirt-smeared feet while shame falls on my shoulders. If I knew my father was coming home, I never would've come outside without shoes. I never would've even come outside at all. This past week that he's been gone has been the best time I've had in a long time. My mother has let me come outside every single day, and I even got to skip my weapons and history lesson yesterday. The last thing I want is for my father to be mad at her.

"He was just having a run in the gardens," she tells him, her voice calm and nice. She always sounds like that, even when Ryatt is throwing a fit, and he throws fits a lot. *"Fresh air is good for a growing boy."*

"His studies are good for him," my father snaps. "Now take him inside and get him cleaned up. We have guests, and I've already ordered dinner to be brought in within the next twenty minutes."

After he turns on his heel and walks away, my mother hurries me inside. She goes with me to my room where she helps me get ready. I don't complain once, even when she runs a wet comb through my hair. By the time I'm dressed in

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fresh clothes and she's collected Ryatt from the nursery, our twenty minutes are almost up.

Inside the dining room, Father sits at the head of the table, and there are three other people sitting to his left. One of them is my Uncle Iberik. His land shares a border with ours, and he's older than my father. The two of them do business together a lot, though I'm not sure exactly what kind. I know my father owns ships at the harbor, and I hear them talking about blacksmiths a lot, but other than that, I don't know. Yet unlike my father, Iberik lives alone and never had any heirs.

The other two people sitting at the table aren't familiar. It's a male and female, both of them with the shiniest hair I've ever seen. The female has red hair and eyes that look like bricks, nearly the same color as the empty fireplace at the left of the room. The male has a brown beard like my father but with slightly bucked teeth. Both of them have piercings through the pointed tips of their ears, jewelry dripping down them like teardrops and chains.

My mother sits to the right of my father, while I help Ryatt into his chair before I take my place between them. There's a set of red flowers in a centerpiece in front of us, but it partially blocks the people, so I'm glad one of the servants put it there. It makes me feel a little more hidden.

The talking at the table doesn't stop as we sit, and I'm glad about that too, because the last time Uncle Iberik was here for dinner, all he did was talk about how I should already be going out on hunting trips by myself and that it didn't do well to raise a soft son.

Uncle Iberik eyes me and my brother with his usual scowl. I want to scowl right back, but there's a prickling sensation between my shoulder blades that distracts me before I can get in trouble for being disrespectful.

As soon as we're settled, a servant comes over and sets

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plates in front of us, and I see Ryatt scrunching his face. I reach over and put his napkin on his lap so I can catch his eye. When he sees the look on my face, he quickly loses his scowl and picks up his fork. He's a picky eater, and when Father is gone, Mother lets us choose what to eat. But he can't be picky now.

Ryatt takes his first bite of boiled spinach and doesn't make a word of argument, and I let out a little sigh of relief before I pick up my own fork. I was so worried about my brother getting into trouble that I didn't pay any attention to what anyone was saying until my mother goes stiff beside me.

"I understand, of course," the unfamiliar male says, fork and knife held in either hand as he speaks and eats at the same time. "It's a valid argument."

"Of course it is, Tobir," Uncle Iberik says to the male. "It's what the loyalists maintained for decades and why, ultimately, we won the war. I for one am glad that we put a stop to Oreans coming and going into Annwyn and for the old king's campaign to destroy the bridge. It needed to be done."

I can't help but glance over at my mother to see how she's reacting to this conversation. Her eyes are on her plate, the grip on her fork tight.

I've had history lessons about the war and the breaking of the bridge, but those are mostly boring, and my tutor always talks about how bad Oreans were. He talks about how they were using up all of Annwyn's resources and starting fights, and how they wanted to take land here for themselves so they could have long life.

I much prefer it when my mother talks about Orea. She is Orean, after all. She was one of the last to come through on the bridge. Sometimes, when she's putting Ryatt and me to bed, we can get her to tell us stories about it. She always looks different when she's talking about her world. Softer and sadder.

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I know she misses it.

"To be sure," the red-haired female says. "And the Oreans that are still here are very lucky in my opinion. They were waived from the law and are allowed to stay and given long life in the process. Not to mention the fact that some Oreans have magic because they bred with us for hundreds of years. They should be thankful."

"Quite right, Netala," Tobir says next to her before shoving a thick piece of meat into his mouth, his fork clanging against his tooth.

Netala tilts her head, mean eyes cutting across the table, and I see how her gaze lingers on my mother's blunt, rounded ears. Ryatt inherited that from her. I used to be so glad that mine were pointed like my father's. It was just one less thing for him to pick on.

"You have magic," Netala says.

I see my mother glance at my father. He doesn't usually like for her to talk about her magic. I don't know why. Her magic is the best.

"She does," my father answers, adjusting in his chair. "My Elore is remarkable."

"What is it she can do?" Tobir asks, watching her curiously.

My father looks over. "Show them, Elore."

Beneath the table, I see my mother's knees lock together. "I'm not sure if I have the calling for that right now…"

The look on my father's face makes her words dry up like dew in the desert. She casts her gaze back to Tobir, and my brother and I watch in awe as her eyelids flutter closed. When she opens them again, the green of her eyes is gone, and in its place, pale irises churn with some type of ancient scrawl, the letters so tiny they're impossible to read.

Across the table, Netala gasps. "Her eyes…"

"Elore is a diviner," my father says smugly. "She

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divines words from the gods and goddesses."

Netala's and Tobir's eyes widen in surprise. I personally have only seen Mother do this a couple dozen times over the years, but I know my father makes her use it when we aren't around.

I watch her face, watch the way the scrawl spins in her eyes, the way the rest of her face has gone calm and relaxed. Ryatt is watching just as closely as I am, and excitement leaps in my belly. I love watching her do her magic, but I know it tires her out. Soon, the words stop spinning, and her strange gaze sharpens on Tobir. I hear the fae male suck in a breath.

"The red-cloaked bearer shall give you two truths and a lie. You will believe the wrong one." Her voice is deeper, not her normal speaking voice, and just like the other times I've heard her make her foretellings, goose bumps go up and down my arms.

Then, Mother blinks quickly, and the strange words disappear from her eyes, the green in her irises fading back into view.

Tobir's brown brows are knotted deep into his skin. He stares at her for a second, like the words are replaying in his head. "What is that supposed to mean?" he demands.

"Elore's foretellings are not always clear to us at the time of speech," my father says.

"So this *is why you took an Orean for yourself, Stanton," Netala says. "Was she able to predict the outcome of the war?"*

Father shakes his head. "Elore's magic only works on people, not worldly events. Some foretellings can be as inconsequential as buying a bushel of spoiled apples, and some…more significant."

"Ooh, I am curious what she predicted about you," she says to my father, her eyes lighting up with curiosity.

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Beside me, my mother goes stiff.

Anger slides over my father's features like slime under a slug, but he wipes it away quickly. "She has not made one for me as of yet," he says lightly, but I'm not tricked by it. He might try to sound calm, but there's something sharp underneath that makes me squirm.

Netala nods, taking another bite of her meal. As she swallows, her eyes lift. "It is a very impressive power, Elore. Your ancestors must have bred with very powerful fae. Tell me, you were one of the last Oreans to come into Annwyn, is that right?"

My mother tips her head. "Yes, that's right."

"Part of the agreement for my support in the war was that I was able to bring in a last batch of Oreans," my father explains. "They make up all of my groundskeepers and servants. Very efficient. They get long life, and I get a long-lasting staff."

I try not to scrunch my nose up. I hate it when he talks about my mother and the others like this. I scratch the back of my forearm, trying my best not to let my anger show up on my face.

My mother's lips go thin, so I reach over and place my hand on her leg under the table and pat her like she does for me sometimes when my father is making me upset. She glances over at me, and her face softens for a second.

"Stanton, your sons are the spitting image of Elore," Netala says, and even though she's smiling, she doesn't look nice.

I don't like that everyone keeps talking about my mother instead of to her, either. It's nothing new, though. Most fae that my father has over are rude to my mother. It's not her fault that my father saw her in Orea and brought her here. It's not her fault that she's Orean, and I don't see why it matters anyway. Just like I don't know why it matters that Ryatt and I

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are only half fae. She just proved that she's powerful in her own right. Her magic is better than most of the fae in the city, so they shouldn't be mean to her.

I shove a bite of meat into my mouth, chewing through my anger, but I immediately grimace just like Ryatt does when he eats something he hates. The food tastes off, like it's been left too long. I try some of the boiled apples instead, but it's overly sweet and mealy, like it's started to go bad. Yuck.

"They do," my father says. "But it is not a bad thing. Elore is very beautiful—and her magic is impressive. It's why I chose her."

My mother twitches. The back of my arm itches again.

"I hope they don't take after her completely," Uncle Iberik says with a laugh, hand swirling his cup of wine.

Tobir keeps chewing away. "Mmm, yes. I've seen plenty of fae and Orean pairings where the child doesn't develop magic. Dreadful."

"My sons will both have magic," Father says, voice like a whip to punish anyone who should say otherwise.

"Of course they will." Netala smiles. "I'm sure they're more fae than Orean, at any rate. Elore herself has been fae-blessed as a diviner. And you—you're The Breaker. The most powerful fae in the kingdom, aside from the king."

I look over at Ryatt as he squirms in his seat, and I want to do the same.

The Breaker. That's what everyone calls my father, and for good reason. Because his magic does just that—it breaks.

I've seen him break rocks, break fingers, break a lame horse's neck. I've seen him break a roof, making the whole thing cave in.

His magic is scary.

Before he retired, he used to help break whole cities for the king. It's why he got this estate. It's why we have forty-three rooms and Orean servants. It's why he was allowed to

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go for one last trip to Orea to bring people back with him just before both he and the king broke the bridge and ended the tie between our worlds. It's why he was permitted to choose my Orean mother.

But just because she lives here and has two half fae sons and amazing magic doesn't mean that the rest of the fae will ever look at her as an equal.

The three of us continue to eat dinner while everyone else talks, even though every bite of food I take tastes gross. I eat it anyway, because no one else is saying anything, and I don't want my father to notice me not eating.

Finally, the servants come in to clear the tables, and I set my fork down, feeling queasy but glad to be done with it. All of the servants are Orean, just like my mother. I think she feels guilty sometimes that they're serving her.

One of them, a man named Jak, comes to collect my mother's plate, and she turns her head up to smile warmly at him, and he gives her a smile right back. All the servants love my mother. I don't know if it's just because she's Orean like them or if it's because she's so kind, but when my father isn't home, it feels more like they're family than our servants.

Luckily, the adults decide to go into the parlor for pipes and drinks, so my father excuses my mother to take us to bed. Even though we're free from being around his guests, I'm still feeling mad and gloomy. My mother's brows are pulled down, and Ryatt is scowling.

But when my mother brings us into our bedroom, we get ready for bed, and then she sits down in the chair set between our beds and tells us a story about Orea. About a place split up between seven kingdoms. About a land where people didn't even have power until fae came. And it doesn't matter that Orea doesn't have magic of its own, because hearing her talk about it makes the whole place seem magical anyway.

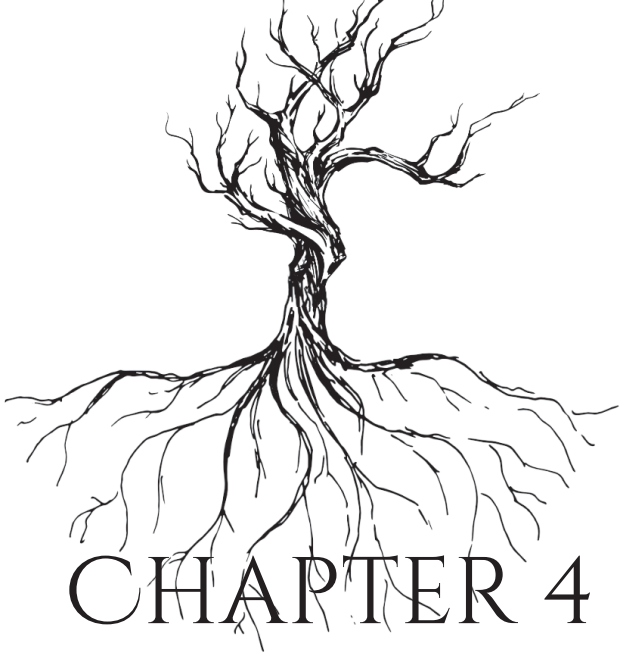
When my eyes get tired, I shift on my pillow and yawn.

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"If the bridge of Lemuria weren't broken, I'd take you back to Orea, Mother."

I'm too sleepy to open my eyes, but I think she sounds both happy and sad when she replies, "I know you would, Slade. I know."

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CHAPTER 4

SLADE

I *'ve raced against a* storm before.

Many times, in fact.

Most of the storms have caught up to me in the past. Drenched me in a pouring shock of tepid water that smeared my mood and cut through my clothes with benign heat. Or pelted me with icy sleet so sharp it cut through my skin.

But to have to race against it now feels like a betrayal of the gods and goddesses. That they could be so fucking cruel as to add this to an already dismal fucking situation.

So I refuse to let the storm win this time. I refuse to let it catch up to Auren.

Argo is the fastest timberwing in Fourth Kingdom. Probably the fastest beast of his kind, and his stamina and skill alone give us a fighting chance. I demand every burst of speed he can give me, drive him harder than I ever have before, and he allows me my demands.

We race the tempest who's clotting the clouds as she

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wails and beats at our backs, throwing a fit to catch up to us. But Argo isn't going to let the bitch win, and neither will I. I won't allow another storm to touch Auren. She has been flooded and wrung out, left to take the barrage without shelter. But so long as I'm here, *I* will be her shelter.

We fly, like lightning shot across the skies, arcing over the ground.

Against my chest, buried beneath two cloaks, Auren breathes. Breathes, but doesn't wake, doesn't stir.

Wretched hours pass as we fly. Every single second of them, the cold batters us, the very air sodden with overflowing dampness gathered from the pursuing storm. My face has long since gone numb, my ass soaked through on the saddle, my fingers unable to feel the clutch of the leather reins. If my eyes could still water, each drop would be nothing but frost against my skin.

Miserable cold and suffocating dark is all I know, but I trust Argo to guide us where we need to go. I keep Auren so far buried beneath layers that I can't see a single inch of her, but I feel the hot press of her breaths against my neck, and that is all that keeps my protective fae nature in check. Keeps me from rotting the clouds and raining down the poison from my rage. I count her breaths like my own heartbeat, using it as the tempo to quell my seething power.

Time and distance drag on.

Then, out of nowhere, a sudden gust of wind knocks into us from the left, and Argo balks out a furious cry as his entire body is slammed from the force. The slippery saddle shifts from the jarring movement, sending both me and Auren tipping.

I lurch forward, hands scrabbling to tighten my grip on the reins, but my numb hands miss the grip. My heart leaps into my throat as we go sliding over.

Digging in my knees, I throw my weight to the side at the

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same time that Argo banks, shoving out his full wingspan to catch my knee. He straightens us with furious attention, another roar of indignation crawling up his throat as I slump over the saddle, breath heaving from the close call.

All that holds us to this saddle is a single leather strap buckled around us both. If Argo hadn't caught himself...

As if the shoving wind was a personal affront to him, Argo turns feral.

He continues to roar at the sky with a renewed vigor to his flight, like it's now his personal mission to battle the wind, refusing his own tiredness and beating it back with sheer fury.

It takes an hour for my hands to stop shaking, for my heartbeat to go back to normal, to not hold the reins to the point of pain. The crash of adrenaline seeps out of me like blood from a wound.

I need to get Auren somewhere safe, somewhere warm, and Deadwell is the closest option I have. Yet the dark landscape mocks me, like instead of moving mile after mile, the snowy world of Fifth beneath us isn't passing by at all. Instead, we're glued to its ether, the shadows mocking us as endless distance stretches, threatening to never give way.

But Argo's sheer will and pissed off determination is unmatched.

Our race brings us closer to the dawning morning, though I thought it would never come. It brings the hint of an angry, curdled sky. I blink against the brightening horizon, and I don't know whether to be relieved or filled with dread at the coming of the sun.

Yet even when the first spikes of daylight cast through the corrugated clouds, Auren doesn't stir. I make sure the cloaks are still wrapped around her, every inch of skin covered. I don't know if she even *could* produce gold right now in her current state if something were to touch her bare skin, but it worries me. She can't afford to use any magic, and

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if it starts spilling from her uncontrollably, even Argo won't be able to keep flying.

Beneath my thighs, Argo's chest heaves. His breath is ragged, muscles shaking from the strain. In the gray light, I can see patches of feathers have been ripped out of his tree-bark wings from the violent gusts that have assaulted him. Stalactites of frost hang from his foamy muzzle like extra fangs, but he doesn't stop roaring, doesn't stop racing.

"Keep going," I urge him, though whether my voice reaches him over the wind, I don't know.

Guilt churns in me as he dives for another pocket of air to help carry him. Even with the burst of furor, he's tiring. I'm pushing him too hard, too fast, too long, but there's no other alternative.

Dawn finally wins over the last of the night. It shines like a beacon, lighting the way for the storm raging. I look behind us, eyeing the clouds that seem to be galloping forward, ready to crush us beneath frozen hooves.

In my arms, Auren shivers, making me grit my frozen teeth and gnash the ice caught between. Thunder rumbles with a grunting nicker and threatening huff, yet Argo rages back at it in a guttural roar that's hoarse with fatigue.

A thousand scenarios play in my head. That we aren't going to make it. That Argo will have to land. That Auren will be even more exposed. That the storm will overcome us.

But somehow, the familiar silhouette of cracked mountains comes into view.

Deadwell.

We made it.

Hope leaps in my chest at the sight of it.

From the ground, all you see is rotted snow and cracked peaks. From the air, all you see is a shadowed, frozen valley caught between the mountains like a row of crooked teeth. It's inhospitable. Ugly. Empty.

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But that's only if you don't know where to look.

Out of habit, I cut a whistle through my teeth to signal Argo, though the beast doesn't need the heads-up even if he can hear me. His eyes are sharp, his sense of direction far better than mine. After all, he's been flying me here for years. He could probably make the trip with his eyes closed.

My chest expands as we get closer, and I cup Auren's cloaked head against my chest. "Almost there. We're almost there," I murmur.

Leaning into Argo's turn, I keep Auren and myself braced as he swoops down toward the craggy tops of the mountains. The tips are shaped like a serrated knife, with cracked crevices that make a jagged sightline and dangerous rockfall. The largest mountain in the middle tilts slightly, like the wind has shoved at it so much for so long that it's finally beginning to bend to its will.

Mountains should know better than to bow to the wind.

But the ridge isn't the only eyesore here. It's the stretch of my magic that truly taints the land.

What once was an empty and bleak breadth on the border of Fifth, is now a crisscross of rot-infected ground. Fetid roots reach all the way from Fourth's border, delving through the snow to curl around the base of the mountains here like insipid crawling vines.

My magic responds to the massive amounts of power that I've already leached into this land, my skin snapping with its presence like it's welcoming me. I can feel it soaked into the snow-packed soil, can feel the call of it thrumming like bloodlust in my veins. But my power has to wait.

Although the mountains below are cracked and crooked, and though the massive roots of rot have made this land ugly and spoiled, it's still the best damn sight to see. I brace myself as we drop down below the clouds at a breakneck speed, my stomach nearly coming up my damn throat as Argo dives.

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For years, this small strip of land has eluded my control. But now, I finally lay claim to it. With the deal I made with Midas, we are officially out of Fifth Kingdom and in my own territory.

Argo swings wide, heading directly for the tallest mountain, right where the rotted lines of rubbled rocks make up the base.

It's the combination of all of it, really. The leaning mountains. The dumps of snow and piles of rock. The festering rot. It all distracts, it all hides.

Anyone who might pass by this part of the world would have no reason to linger and no desire to. Argo bypasses the cracked fang-tipped peak, heading for the smallest mountain. It has a side like a mantel, and the rocky shelf overhangs far enough to offer shelter to the hidden village below. This nearly invisible lip in the leaning mountain looks inconspicuous but it calls to me as much as my rot does.

You'd only see the small town if you purposely came poking around or knew where to go. The buildings are all made of the same gritty rock, blending against the mountainside effortlessly, hidden beneath the snowy shelf.

It's here, shrouded in the forbidden cold, that my greatest secret hides.

Drollard Village.

Just then, the chasing storm lashes out, punishing us for reaching our destination. The clouds slash open and frozen rain pours, soaking through my clothes immediately.

Argo heads straight down to the village, rain streaming off his outstretched wings and freezing against his feathers. He only circles once before his exhausted body slams into the ground so hard my teeth clack. He sways where he stands but manages to stay upright, his talons digging into the snow for purchase as frozen froth batters from his mouth.

"Good beast," I praise him. He turns his head to blink at

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me, and though he looks exhausted, the gleam in his hawklike eye is also smug. “Yeah, you earned every fucking jerky strip you want.”

I look around, squinting through the downpour, but all is quiet in the early morning pause. Twenty feet away, rows of rocky houses are lined, lazy smoke rising from chimneys beneath the lip of the mountain, ice gathered on top of the overhang like sheets of shingles.

My frozen hand reaches down for the buckle on the saddle, but it’s a struggle to unstrap myself. My fingers are too numb to get them to work right, and now with the sleet lashing down, it’s slippery. But I can’t risk letting go of Auren with my other hand because I need to keep her dry and secure.

A noise of frustration tears from my lips like a growl. “Come the fuck on.”

“Sire?”

My head snaps up at the voice, and I zero in on one of the villagers walking up from the small pavilion that’s stuffed between the cracked cave of the mountainside. He hurries over, hood pulled up to try and fend off the deluge that’s just started to pour, his bulbous nose showing beneath. “Let me.”

With deft fingers, he quickly undoes the strap, and I jump down with Auren.

“Thank you, Theo,” I say. He’s not as wary of me as some of the others, but he still won’t quite look me in the eye.

“Should I alert the watch?”

I shake my head. “No need. Just see that Argo’s taken care of in the Perch. Tell Selby to give him whatever he wants and as much of it, including extra blankets in his roost. He’s more than earned it.”

Theo tips his head, already walking over to grab Argo’s strap. To his credit, he only slightly balks at the timberwing’s appearance before leading him to the Perch where he can be cared for.

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As soon as they walk away, I hurry off with Auren, my booted feet stepping onto the white stone path that blends into the slushing snow. My rot doesn't spread into the village itself, instead kept strategically around the border like a barbed rampart to keep our enemies out. And although it doesn't spread here, this place is still steeped in dreariness.

By all accounts, Drollard Village doesn't exist. Maybe that's why it's always felt so dismal. By keeping it secret, I've somehow made it feel even more devoid.

This place is by no means picturesque. It's harsh and cold and gaunt, with lonely homes cut into the hollowed mountainside, cast in perpetual shadow. The people who live here don't have the conveniences of being in a city where travel and trade are abundant. Instead, they toil to live off this bleak land, while supplemented with the supplies I can bring them. Even so, not one of them will ever leave.

They can't.

Aside from the village watch, everyone is asleep at this dawning hour, windows shuttered in anticipation of the storm. I quickly pass by the slanted walls of the slate-faced houses, each wooden door not even a stone's throw apart from one another. Yet the sizes of the homes themselves are deceiving since their depth is made up within the recesses of the mountain. Prickled lace vines stretch up from craggy splits in the rock floor and spider web around the doors and windows, their white-skinned berries still hanging in clumps from their stems.

The stone beneath my feet is slick with the new rain, so I take measured steps. I don't want to slip with Auren in my arms, but I still try to go as fast as I can, boots digging into every step.

There are a few hardy evergreen trees clinging to life along the path, their frosted limbs carrying the weight of the endless cold and giving me some reprieve from the rain as I

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tuck Auren closer against my chest.

When I get to the bend in the path, I follow the curve of the mountain where the homes end, leaving the rock face bare save for the snow frozen against it. Above, the mountainside curls like a riptide, creating a giant, protective awning. A sheet of frozen rain drips down from it like a thin waterfall, and I hesitate, trying to think of a better way to get Auren through without soaking her completely.

"Here, let me."

My arms automatically tighten around Auren, and I whip around at the sound of my brother's voice. "What are you doing here?"

Ryatt stalks through the rain and, without a word, removes his cloak and flings it over both our heads to block the downpour. I have a feeling he does it more for Auren's sake than mine. We duck beneath the sheet of rainwater as quickly as we can, and once we pass beneath the rock shelf, we're blessedly out of the storm and into the mountain's cave.

"Thanks," I mutter.

Ryatt lowers his arms and brings the cloak down again but doesn't bother to put it back on.

Now encased in the shadows of the cave, it would be completely pitch-black if it weren't for the soft blue glow that comes from the fluorescent veins that run through the belly of the mountain. These cerulean streaks branch off in every direction, running through the walls, floor, and ceiling, while colorless beetles cling to their surface to nibble on their sediment. Stalactites reach down from the ceiling, pointing at us in accusation.

"So? You going to tell me what you're doing here?" I ask as we walk, my voice echoing bleakly.

"Did you really think I wasn't going to come?" Ryatt's hands clench around his cloak in bitter twists. "I wanted to come here the moment Midas issued his threats, and you

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know it, so you can just save your fucking commands," he snaps, jaw locked tight.

I feel my own teeth grind in response. I probably have no right to be frustrated with him, because I understand his anger, and yet, I am. As he often is with me.

"Fine," I relent. I'm too cold and exhausted to argue. "We'll talk more tomorrow. But I need to get her warm and dry."

He glances at Auren from the corner of his eyes. "Fucking storm had to hit tonight of all nights."

My brother and I walk in tense silence through the cave. Without even trying, our strides match, our shoulders at the same height, our clothes nearly identical. When my fae nature isn't out, we could pass for twins, a fact that I've used to my advantage many, many times.

Despite the fact that we always effortlessly fall into stride with one another, we always seem to step on each other's toes.

I would die for Ryatt, and he's given up a lot to be at my side, but most days, we'd gladly pummel each other.

Tonight is no different.

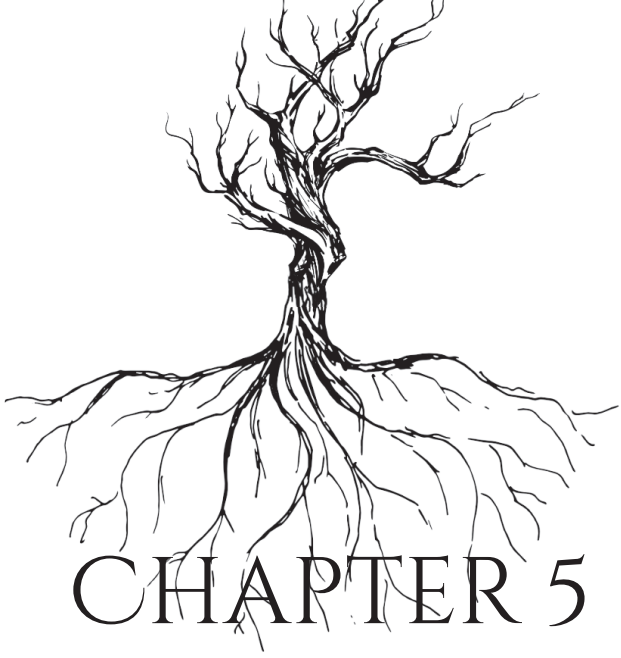
We eat up the rest of the distance, and then, we're here, at our house in the cave, descended in blue shadows with stalagmites like standing guards.

The Grotto.

"Home sweet home," Ryatt mutters.

Something sours in my stomach. "Yeah. Home sweet home."

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CHAPTER 5

SLADE

Age 8

"Slade!"

I look down at Ryatt, his chubby legs scrabbling as he tries and fails to climb up the tree after me. I knew he was going to try to follow me up here. But every time he sees that he can't, he starts whining like a baby, scaring all the birds away until I come down.

"Slade!"

Knowing I can't keep ignoring him, I roll up the sleeves of my shirt and scratch at my arms. "I'll be back," I tell the little nestling.

It chirps at me.

When I hear Ryatt scrabbling again below, I lean over my branch, moving aside some of the brown, dead leaves. "You can't come up here. You're too little."

His face rumples with anger as he stares up at me. "Am

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not."

"You are," I tell him. "Besides, you're not allowed to climb trees yet."

He drops his feet to the ground again, just so he can stomp one of them in a fit. His socks are rolled down unevenly, both of them covered in grass stains. Mother always clucks her tongue when we come in with our white socks streaked with grass, but tells us that it's the same color as our eyes, so at least it matches.

I swipe some sweat off my forehead and sigh, abandoning my tree branch so I can jump down next to him. "Happy?"

He nods. "I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry." But now that he's mentioned it, I'm hungry too. "Come on. I bet Cook will give us something."

"It's hot," Ryatt whines.

"It's summer, stupid," I tell him with a snicker.

He shoots me an angry look. "I'm gonna tell."

"No, you're not." I grin over at him, because Ryatt and I never tattle on each other. It's our rule.

He shrugs.

The two of us head toward the estate. Now that I'm not under the shade of the tree anymore, I realize just how hot it really is. No wonder Ryatt's face is all ruddy and his black hair is sticking up with sweat. I probably look the same.

I got done with my lessons earlier, and the nursemaid let Ryatt come outside for fresh air, so we've been out here for a while. I don't know how long. I get distracted when I check on the bird nests.

"Let's go to the pond!" Ryatt says out of the blue, just as we're almost to the shrubs.

I shoot him a look. "You just said you're starving."

"Pond!"

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"Fine," I relent with a groan. "But just for a little. Then we're going in to eat."

Ryatt nods and starts racing down the hill. I run after him, pretending like he's faster, and he laughs with a screech. We run around to the side of the estate, making it about halfway before Ryatt's legs get tired and he has to stop.

"I'm thirsty," he whines.

"I'll dunk your head in the pond then."

He scowls at me, but I laugh and nudge him right in the ribs where I know he's ticklish. He tries to fight it for a second, but he loses in a fit of squirmy giggles.

Past the house are the stables, and just on the other side of that is the pond. We pass by the paddock where a couple of Father's horses are standing around, grazing on the grass.

I think nothing of it at first.

Thwack.

It sounds like our stablemaster whenever he uses the riding crop on one of the horses. I hear the slap on the hindquarters, the swift whack of correction.

Thwack.

Ryatt doesn't notice a thing either.

But I stop for some reason, my hand shooting out to my brother's arm so I can stop him too. "Hold on."

"Why?" he whines.

I scratch my arm. "Just stay here for a sec."

He frowns, and I know he's going to argue, but luckily, one of the horses comes over to the fence just then and distracts him. He climbs up on the fence and starts to pet it, and I immediately hurry forward. But when I pass the stable, there's no one inside.

Thwack.

I whip my head to the right, my feet carrying me forward.

And then they jolt to a stop.

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It's not the stablemaster. It's not a crop. It's not a horse.

It's my father, standing over my mother, the two of them against the outside wall of the stable. I can't figure out what I'm seeing right away, so I just stand there and watch.

But then my father's hand comes down, and he slaps my mother so hard that she falls down onto the ground. His mouth is moving, hissing out angry words, but I can't hear them.

Shock freezes me in place.

There's a loud sound in my ears. Or maybe the sound is in my blood, because I can hear it and feel it at the same time. My back itches. My arms feel like ants are crawling all over them. My veins feel cold. Even my head feels weird.

For a second, I'm just standing there like a statue, feeling and hearing. My blood, my skin, it's so loud I think I might pass out.

But then my father raises his hand again. My mother ducks her head. And I get so mad that it mixes with the noise and all of it just...bursts.

Before my father can bring his hand down again, I'm screaming at him. "Stop!"

I move faster than I can think, and then I'm shoving him with all my might. There's a look of shock on his face as I push him, but I look at him with hate. So maybe hate is stronger than shock, and that's why I'm able to make his body slam into the stable wall.

But…I didn't think hate was strong enough to bring down a wall.

The wooden stable was built solid and strong, but somehow, the wall collapses as soon as he hits it.

The wall falls in, making my father fall with it, and I watch as the wood disintegrates, tiny splinters puffing up into the air like dust as he goes crashing to the ground in a heap. The noise in me is now the noise of part of the roof caving in,

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and the rest of the wall going with it, burying my father beneath the boards.

"Slade!" my mother calls, scrabbling backwards with fright.

I start to go to her, but my father's fist punches through the scraps, and he snaps his fingers, making his power lash out, breaking the wood on top of him with a crack. It falls away from him as he gets to his feet, and the look on his face makes all the blood drain from mine.

"How dare you!"

He's furious. Black eyes stuck in a netting of bloodshot veins that make him look even angrier. I know he's going to strike me next, but I don't care. I don't care, so long as he doesn't hit her again.

He steps toward me, and I brace myself, feeling like all the coldness in my veins drops right down through my feet, and my father lurches to a stop. He pauses, staring at the ground around me. "What the—"

I follow his gaze. The grass around my feet isn't green anymore. It's the pale, dead color of wheat. There are patches of dirt where I can see weird looking lines drawn through it, and those same black lines have spread up what's left of the crooked stable like ugly roots. The wood itself looks like it's been in hard weather for years and that a single exhale will knock the rest of it down.

"Slade…"

At my mother's voice, I look over at where she's still crouched on the ground, but the lines didn't touch her. She's on the only spot of ground where the grass is still alive and green. Her gaze isn't on my face as she watches me with wide eyes. She's studying my neck, my arms, my back.

Right then, it sinks in that I hurt. All over.

My father spins toward her, but I jump in front of her. I'm breathing way too fast and feeling way too short, but I'm

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not going to move. I'm not going to let him hit her again.

"No," I tell him, and my voice is the last thing that's loud, because everything I was hearing inside of me has gone quiet, and I'm suddenly really tired.

Behind me, I feel my mother grab my leg and try to push me away, but I ignore it. Father has taken the cane to me before, and I was fine. I can handle it again because I'm not a baby. I want to tell Mother this, but then Father strides to me and grips me by the shoulders, his eyes wide.

At first I think it's a trick, but when the shock doesn't leave his eyes, when his hand doesn't come up to strike me, I finally look down to see what he's looking at. To see what my mother was looking at before.

My arms are bleeding, which is probably why they hurt so bad. But it's not the blood that makes my eyes go as big as saucers. No, it's the black things sticking out of them, sharp little points that have driven through my skin like they pierced straight through me.

At first, I think maybe some of the splinters from the stable broke off and stabbed into me. But the longer I look, I see that's not the case. The things are identical on both of my arms, and they didn't stab into me. They came out of me.

I'm frozen in shock as my father reaches forward and presses against one of the black things. Both of us hiss in pain. I look up and notice that his thumb is now bloody, as if the black spike was so sharp that it cut him.

All the previous rage from his face is replaced with a strange grin as he looks at the blood for another second before he moves his attention to me. "My son."

He quickly grips me by the shoulders again and makes me bend, and then I feel another jolt of pain when he presses a spot on my back, making my spine arch as I jerk upright again. "Ow!"

My father laughs as he releases me. "Look at you!" he

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says, his grin wider than I've ever seen it before. "Only eight years old, and look at this!"

"What is it?" I ask worriedly, staring at the bloody drips coming from the sharp black bumps. There are black veins stretching from the base of them, going down my arms like Ryatt took a quill to my skin and drew all over. I try to rub it off, but it won't go away.

"You transformed," Father says excitedly. "Your power came in."

I feel myself go cold all over. "What?"

He grins and then yanks up my arm to show me. "See! You've already manifested."

My eyes track from the veins in my arm to the veins in the ground that trail up the rotted outer boards of the stable wall. They're the same.

"I knew my son would be powerful."

I don't feel powerful. I feel tired and everything hurts, and I'm so angry and so scared…

When I start to cry, I know it's a mistake, but I can't help it.

The pride instantly leaves his face, and he looks at me with disgust. "Stop that. I will not have a blabbering baby for a son," he says coldly before his black eyes track to my mother. "Get him cleaned up and then send him to the gardens. I want to start testing what he can do," he tells her, and then he adds, "and you, stay in your room. I don't want to see you for the rest of the night."

My mother's grip on my leg tightens.

He turns and stalks away, and so many tears fall down my cheeks that I can't even keep track of them all, but I'm glad he's not here to count them. I try to stop, I really do, but everything hurts and I don't understand, and my mother…

Just then, her face appears as she kneels in front of me, her eyes red-rimmed to match the mark on her cheek, the split

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in her lip.

"Am I…a Breaker?" I ask, and it makes me cry a little harder, because I don't want to be anything like my father. But I somehow broke the stable wall, and I broke the ground, and these spikes broke through my skin…and I feel like a monster.

She shakes her head, gently tipping my chin up. "No, Slade. Not you. You don't break things. You protect them."

But when I look around the yard, this doesn't look like protecting. This looks like ruin. My father ruins things too. Just looking at my mother's face reminds me of that.

Even though my arm hurts a lot to move it, I lift my hand and softly touch her cheek. "Are you alright?"

Now she's the one whose face crumples as tears start to run down her cheeks. Dropping my hand, I reach forward and carefully take hers and squeeze, trying to ignore all those black lines spreading to my fingertips.

"Don't cry, Mother. I'll protect you."

This doesn't make her feel better, because she just cries harder. My eyes drop, and I wish I was older, wish I could do something. Looking down, I see the grass stains on the hem of her white dress, from when Father hit her and she fell to the ground.

"Slade?"

We both turn to see Ryatt behind me, frowning and holding a bunch of strawberries in his shirt. He must've wandered off to the garden for a snack. I forgot he was out here. I'm so glad he didn't see.

"Look, Ryatt," I say, keeping his attention on me. His mouth drops open, and he whips a finger in my direction, making his strawberry hoard fall to the ground. "What's that?"

"I got my magic," I say, trying to sound happy, sniffing so that I can make myself stop crying.

Excitement flashes over his red-stained cheeks. "Can I

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touch it?"

"Sure."

He hurries forward, his red-stained finger smoothing over one of the black spikes. "Does it hurt?"

I shrug. "A little."

He grins, turning to our mother, but whatever he was going to say to her gets tossed away, and he frowns. "Mother?"

She has a pasted-on smile, and she's already wiped off her cheeks, but she still looks all wrong. "Ryatt, those strawberries look very good."

He's not deterred. "You're crying?"

"I'm alright, darling. Just took a tumble. See?" she says, motioning toward the bottom of her dress.

He nods and then slips his red sticky hand into her other hand. "That's okay, I fell too," he says, pointing to his soiled socks. "And know what?" he asks.

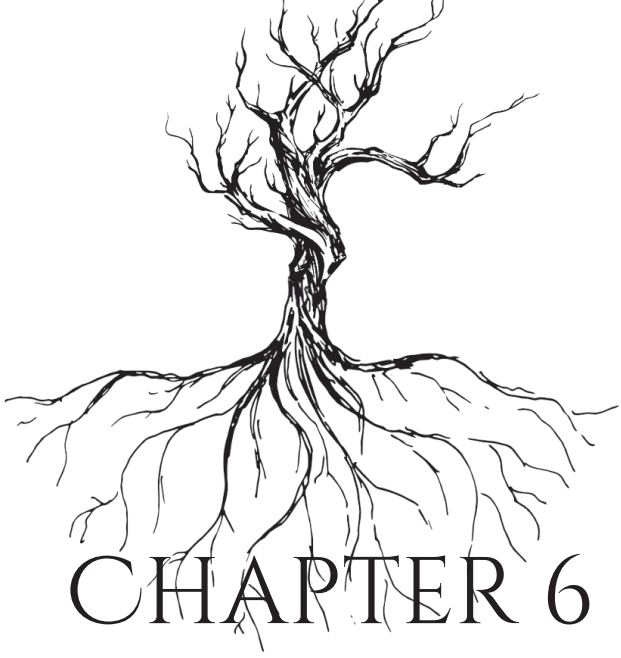
"What?"

"The grass stains match your eyes too."

I don't think I ever saw a smile that looked so sad.

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CHAPTER 6

SLADE

Aside from the stalagmites that reach up from the ground in the cave, there are also bold stalactites hanging from the ceiling too. They perfectly taper around the front door of the Grotto like an archway, the craggy pillars hanging down in sharp peaks. They're wrapped in thin coils of fluorescence, casting blue shadows upon our faces as we pass beneath them.

I have warring emotions when it comes to being here. On one hand, it's a comfort. On the other, it feels like a punishment. It might be strange for some that we have a house inside a cave, but it's private and hidden, and despite the bleak gray walls, I have found some comfort here.

Ryatt steps in front of me and shoves the front door open, its hinges squeaking from the perpetual damp in the air. I rush through the dark house, not needing the light, knowing where everything is by memory.

I quickly make it to the front room, scant shadows

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making up the shapes of furniture that I know by heart. I feel my boots hit the white fur rug that sits in the center of the room, just beneath a circle table that has rings stained on the wood from all the glasses of alcohol my Wrath and I have set on it, condensation be damned.

I stop when my shins hit the cushioned sofa, and by the time I set Auren down on it and start to pull off her wet shoes, Ryatt is already behind me, getting to work on lighting a fire.

Using the cushions, I carefully prop Auren up so that she's not lying directly on her back. Because her back…

I can't bear to think about it.

About what he did to her.

Rage surges inside of me, and I wish I was in Ranhold, that I could turn back time and bring Midas to life again so I could kill him myself. I'd do it slowly. Cutting off limb after limb. Rotting him one vein at a time. Crushing his heart in my fist.

Making him suffer.

The strike of a flint draws sparks at my back, and I calm my anger to focus on my task. I need to get her warm and dry, or the rot inside of her won't matter, because she'll die of hypothermia instead.

I strip the wet layers of cloaks off of Auren. I toss them both to the floor, clumps of ice breaking as they land, water puddling beneath them. I'm thankful to find that her dress beneath is damp but not soaked-through, only small pebbles of snow stuck to the hem. I quickly yank the blankets off the back of the sofa and pile them on top of her, tucking them in tight around her body.

A soft orange glow begins to light up the house, and I waste no time pulling the sofa forward, its legs screeching in protest as I drag it across the floor and settle it right in front of the fireplace. I can hear Ryatt moving around the room, lighting sconces as he goes, trying to ward off the chill.

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